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# Crossing the intercultural borders into 3rd space culture(s): implications for teacher education in the twenty-first century

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This article looks at a year-long network-based exchange between two groups of student-teachers in Spain and the USA, who were involved in various network-based collaborative activities as part of their teaching education. Their online interaction was facilitated through diverse communicative modes such as Skype, Moodle, Voicethread and Second Life (SL). It was found that the participants' interaction with their distanced partners varied according to the available communication modes as they constructed 'membership' identities in the virtual interaction. The analysis hints at the need to reconsider what 'intercultural' means within a 'third space'.

Este artículo analiza un intercambio a través del Internet entre dos grupos de estudiantes de educación (formación de profesorado) de España y los EE.UU. Los alumnos participaron en diversas actividades de 'telecolaboración' como parte de sus cursos de metodología y prácticas. Su interacción 'online' fue facilitada a través de diversas modalidades de comunicación, tales como Skype, Moodle, Voicethread y Second Life (SL). El estudio muestra que la interacción entre los participantes variaba según los tipos de comunicación disponibles y esto influía en la manera en que se construyeron sus identidades en la interacción virtual. El análisis apunta a la necesidad de reconsiderar que se entiende por 'intercultural' dentro del 'tercer espacio'.

**Keywords:** teacher education; intercultural communication; intercultural exchange; multimodality; intercultural awareness; multiliteracies

## Introduction

This article outlines and then discusses a year-long network-based exchange between two groups of student-teachers; one group in Catalunya (Spain) and the other group in Illinois (USA). The student-teachers were involved in various collaborative activities; however this text looks principally at the student-teachers' collaborative designing of teaching sequences and podcasts. Their online interaction was facilitated through diverse communicative modes including forums, Skype, Moodle, Voicethread and Second Life (SL).<sup>1</sup> Literature on network exchanges of this type often mentions Intercultural Communicative Competences (ICC) as a key element for success and/or a possible stumbling block for this form of interaction (Belz, 2007; Furstenberg & Levet, 2010; Helm & Guth, 2010; Müller-Hartmann, 2006; O'Dowd, 2006). Along those lines, this paper interrogates what ICC in a 'third

space' (Bhabha, 1994) may mean, when placed against the backdrop of computer-mediated communication and virtual communities.

This is especially relevant for the student-teachers in the study, some of whom were quite familiar with these technological tools and virtual spaces, others who were less so.

Although many millions of people do not have access to the Internet, a computer, or even basic education, a new generation has grown up in a digital age where geographic boundaries do not pose a barrier to international, intercultural communication. As a sub-group, SL participants have moved beyond static web pages and text-based social networking environments, choosing instead to explore the new virtual environments. (Diehl & Prins, 2008, pp. 102–103)

Thus, these student-teachers can easily suppose that their future students will be 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) with ample personal experience in using the Internet. Furthermore, no matter what their own personal experience with these tools, most, if not all, of these student-teachers will be expected to integrate some sort of pedagogical use of Web 2.0 into their language classrooms in the future (Dooly, 2010a). Many definitions of what exactly Web 2.0 is have emerged since the term was first coined by O'Reilly in 2005 to refer to the interconnected, globalized world of business.

In the last few years much hyperbole has surrounded Web 2.0, which for some is just a new technology bubble while for others it is a radical transformation in the way people communicate, socialise, do business (Tapscott and Williams 2006) and do politics (Tumulty 2008; Delany 2008), as seen by the extraordinary role played by social media in Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign for the US presidency or in the organization and reporting of the protests after the 2009 elections in Iran. (Guth & Helm, 2010, p. 15)

The upheaval of the Tunisian government, baptised as the Jasmine revolution (Walt, 2011), can be added to this list of how Web 2.0 is changing the balance of world political power. 'The Jasmine Revolution [...] needed no leaders to rally the protesters or organize the demonstrations. Instead, the revolt was refueled by a steady stream of anonymous text messages, Twitter and Facebook updates' (Walt, 2011). The fact that the Egyptian government declared an immediate blackout of Internet and cellphones on 28 January 2011, as the unrest of Tunisia swept into Egypt less than two weeks after Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, provides further evidence that heads of state are becoming more aware of the 'viral' power of new communication technology.

It is patent, then, that how student-teachers and their future students use these Web 2.0 tools to communicate with other, distanced partners will be an important issue, not only in political terms but also in the sense of construction of individual and cultural identity. The main idea of network-based language practice (tele-collaborative language learning) is that computers provide a means of mediating communication between persons across the globe, synchronously or asynchronously. The possibilities of language learners coming into contact with other learners or speakers of the target language they are studying have multiplied exponentially with the increment of Internet access in the classroom, not to mention their use of communication technologies in their personal lives.

This means that the opportunities for transglobal contact between language learners from different cultures are also much greater. Nonetheless, social actors coming from different cultural backgrounds (with specific collaborative tasks to

undertake) may not necessarily follow the patterns of face-to-face intercultural interaction. It is proposed in this paper that the affordances of the different interactional modes may have rendered ‘traditional’ categorizations of culture less salient to these student-teachers when engaged in ‘emergent’ cultures such as virtual communities. It also implies a need to revise current models of ICC and their application to such exchanges.

Telecollaboration 2.0 situates itself within a globalized context where the concepts of language and culture differ from those associated with national identity. [...] Much of the interaction within this globalized context takes place online where individuals may have multiple identities which may certainly include national and ethnic ones but, as Risager (2007) argues, “identities should be understood as processes that take place between particular players under particular historical and geographical circumstances in multicultural communities that form and develop across existing national boundaries” (p. 1). [...] Within the educational context of Telecollaboration 2.0 projects, the aim is not *necessarily* for learners to prepare to go abroad, but for them to learn to operate, that is to communicate, collaborate, create and negotiate, effectively in multilingual, multicultural global networks using any number of languages [...] and communication modes (oral, visual and/or textual, synchronous or asynchronous) in more or less open or closed environments. (Helm & Guth, 2010, pp. 71–72)

Within a telecollaborative milieu, this article first describes the context and data of the exchange, followed by a discussion of ways in which the individuals oriented their interaction with their distanced partners according to the different available communication channels and modes. The article then looks at how ‘membership’ identities were constructed in the virtual interaction and the way in which these online identities influenced expectations concerning the behaviour of the ‘other’.

### **How the exchange was set up: context, participants and task-design**

The exchange was conceived and implemented as a distanced-partner, triangulated teacher training case study. Making use of various 2.0 tools freely available to the participants, two teacher educators – one at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), the other located at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign (UIUC) – designed different tasks and activities for their students to carry out. Three underlying goals of the exchange design were to (a) foster student-teacher reflection on their own practice and to promote applied critical thinking; (b) reduce the feeling of teacher isolation and provide a means of peer-support and knowledge-sharing, as well as opinions and experiences; (c) create a virtual community of practice that these student-teachers might carry over into their professional lives. A key element to the design was the need for collaboration with ‘virtual’ partners, that is, group members whom the student-teachers could only communicate with through different Internet media.

Locally, the groups of student-teachers were heterogeneous. For instance, in the UAB group there were Spanish, Catalan, Finnish and Czech student-teachers (and one doctoral research student from Cyprus), while in the UIUC group there were North American, Mexican, South Korean, Spanish, Indian and Honduran students. There were more female students than male, with five females and two males in the UAB group and ten females and three males in the UIUC group. The two groups were studying similar degrees but at different levels. The UAB student-teachers were taking part in their school placement tutorials in their final year of Initial Teacher

Training, specializing in English as a Foreign Language; the UIUC students were involved in two specialized courses (Reading and Writing for English as a Second Language and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) for ESL Teaching), both at MA level, for a Teaching of English as a Second Language degree.

Some of the challenges faced by the teacher educators when designing the activities involved (a) finding areas of convergence between classes (despite their very different profiles, levels and schedules); (b) designing common tasks that promoted community but did not feel like ‘added burden’ activities; (c) designing ‘sub-tasks’ that built up anticipation and a feeling of unity with their online partners before they actually embarked on the real telecollaboration; and (d) dealing with ‘divergences’ in the programme expectations and outcomes.

Meeting these diverse challenges meant fostering many different types of activities during the year-long exchange. For instance, both groups had completely separate activities related to their face-to-face (henceforth F2F) classes while carrying out telecollaborative activities – some of which were later transferred to their own practice teaching. For reasons of space, this article only discusses some of the telecollaborative activities, in particular two activities that had relevance for both online and F2F collaborative learning.

In the first semester, there was an important point in common. Both classes had to design teaching units (TUs), although even in this case there were divergences: the UAB student-teachers were designing a TU for a foreign language (English) class for primary education, whereas the UIUC student-teachers had to design a CMC-based foreign language (any language; foreign or second language) for either primary or secondary (according to the profile of the student-teacher). In the first semester, then, the teacher-educators decided to limit the online exchange to (a) getting to know each other; (b) forming online working groups; (c) giving feedback on the individual TUs in the working groups. This was facilitated through personal introductions through voicethread, followed by a ‘scavenger hunt’<sup>2</sup> in Second Life (see Figure 1 and further explanation in the final notes) where the students not only participated in a general round of introductions of both groups but also got to know their online working partners (unknown to the student-teachers, these groups had already been assigned and they ‘ended up’ as groups in the scavenger hunt).<sup>3</sup> These same groups were then provided with virtual ‘spaces’, tools for meetings, and places for displaying and giving feedback for the TUs.

Feedback from the students about the exchange, the different ways in which they made use (or not) of their partners’ feedback and the final version of the TUs ended



Figure 1. UAB and UIUC groups take part in Second Life activities.

the first semester. In the second semester, the teacher-educators felt that it was important to get the network-based partners to truly collaborate on one, unified project per working group. They were also keen to see if the activities online could be more fully integrated into F2F activities. Thus, in the second round of the exchange, the student-teachers were asked to develop together a podcast/vodcast activity<sup>4</sup> that could be used in an F2F teaching situation. Since the UAB students had more opportunities to implement the activity (their school placement was more extensive), the podcasts were designed according to the student needs of the UAB student-teachers.

Post-evaluation (student feedback, triangulated teacher-educators and research student data) revealed that, on the whole, both groups developed more features of reflective teachers in comparison to the beginning of the year. Transcripts and online posts showed more critical thinking about their own and others' teaching practices and beliefs. Moreover, after having lived experiences of a virtual community of practice, the student-teachers had begun to adopt 'ways of doing/being' a teacher (Dooly, 2009) and to engage in the shared repertoire of a community of practice of experienced teachers, displaying more 'experienced practitioner' knowledge, tools, resources and ways of addressing problems than when the exchange had begun. However, it is not the aim of this paper to go into more detail about this aspect of the research (teacher development), which stemmed from the telecollaborative exchange. Instead, the intention is to focus on the notion of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in 2.0 contexts as the critical nexus of the 3rd space.

### **Intercultural discursive interaction in 3rd space: a proposal for analysis**

It is important to note that despite the international, distanced exchange, Intercultural Communicative Competences were never made explicit as part of the teaching and learning design of the exchange. In part, this was due to the fact that the course programmes themselves were quite limited, and the different activities had already put a considerable 'strain' on the limits that the teacher-educators were allowed in their individual course programmes. Secondly, the teacher-educators were interested to see if issues, questions, or any type of revelation related to interculturality emerged on their own. Considering the heterogeneous composite of the local groups and the fact that the exchange was taking place between two groups on opposite sides of the globe, it seemed almost inevitable that some element of ICC would be made relevant by the participants themselves. After all, the implications of transglobal communication patterns through Web 2.0 seem bound to create intricate and uncertain intercultural interaction, especially when the participating actors all have various cultural backgrounds (Neuliep, 2003).

However, it is important not to 'essentialize' the cultural traits of the participants in the online exchange, since this might lead to assumptions that all incidences or misunderstandings in the exchange were related to the meeting of 'cultures'. It has been suggested that ICC 'is not something innate within us, nor does it occur accidentally' (Wiseman, 2002, p. 211); ICC is 'an acquired quality' (Kupka, Everett, & Wildermuth, 2007, p. 20). This highlights the importance of the context in which the knowledge, skills and attitudes commonly attributed to ICC are attained. If contextualization is coupled with the notion that 'identity' is dynamic and fluid, it becomes apparent that where cultural identity and intercultural competences come into play (e.g. in the 'third space') has a key role in the way in which ICC

evolves. Most ICC models designed for language learning have focused on face-to-face encounters. One of the most influential models in language teaching is Byram's model of knowledge of self and other, knowledge of interaction, knowledge of individual and society, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and social interaction, and attitudes of relativizing self (Byram, 1997). However,

Byram's model was not developed for telecollaboration contexts where fieldwork, which has "a prospective and retrospective relationship with the classroom" [...], takes place online, and where interaction is not necessarily between native speakers or speakers who have in-depth knowledge of the so-called 'national' target culture. (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 70)

Furthermore, as Wiseman (2002) has suggested, the agentive role of individuals in any social interaction is important. According to Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b), individuals are 'oriented' to social action and in doing so, they acquire a set of embodied dispositions; nonetheless this should not be understood as previously determined behaviour. An individual's orientation to social action is shaped by social and cultural conditions – which in turn shape and influence their orientation (Dooly, 2010b). In other words, Bourdieu's theory highlights the interrelationship between individual agency and social structures. It is suggested here that the nexus between the two can be observed in the interactants' discursive interaction online.

Social actors will centre their reasoning, construct further discourse, and act according to seemingly logical, socially and culturally formed discursive practices (Bakhtin 1981, Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, Fairclough 1989, 1992, Fairclough 2005, Foucault 1972, Foucault 1980). Of course, as Risse-Kappen (1994) aptly puts it, ideas do not float freely – they cannot exist without agents – but at the same time, these agents are not simply 'carriers' of these ideas, they are social actors engaged in a complex interaction between many different – and sometimes conflictive – discourses and practices. (Dooly, Vallejo, & Unamuno, 2009, p. 5)

Linguists such as Gumperz (1978, 1982) have identified inherent cultural communicative traits. Ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) carried out ethnographic conversation analysis, based on the assumption that people produce and enact their own individual understanding of social and cultural happenings (interaction) by assigning (constructing) people and objects to categories. This early discourse analysis/ethnographic work has been further developed by researchers in order to identify the ways in which individuals construct and assign cultural categories to groups (Busch, 2010; Dooly, 2009; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009; Moermann, 1988).

Thus, the position taken in this paper is that the participants in the tele-collaborative exchange were engaged in category-construction (categorizations as fluid memberships), within an action-oriented process. In this ongoing process (e.g. engagement with distanced partners), categories are organized and used in ways that are consequential and implicative for the participants engaged in interaction, both off- and online. This approach allows for the fact that categories will necessarily have fuzzy membership boundaries, and permit multiple and even contrasting possibilities for description. In turn, this allows for an analysis of the talk (face-to-face and online discourse) as a constant dialogic flux composed of both individual and contextual factors.

By recognising talk as a social activity, this language-in-use approach recognises that a category system is not simply for organizing our understanding of the world. Categories are tools for talking about things in ways that are adaptable to the requirements of the situation, adaptable to differences of perspective, and changing perspectives. In short, categories are ways to construct shared meaning. Above all, categories help put utterances to work in the pragmatics of social interaction. [...] It could even be argued that interactive discourse is a situated cognitive activity in itself (see Teasley 1997; Saint-Dizier De Almeida 1998). These arguments underline the fact that categorical descriptions involve the discourse participants' choice and that the speaker is positioned, interested and accountable for how things are described and categorized. (Dooley, 2009, p. 32)

This also implies that the telecollaborative exchange can be analysed through terms of discursive social interactions rather than as idealized, essentialist conceptualizations. In other words, the teachers and student-teachers involved are seen as 'inter-textualized' (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Maybin, 2005), interactional social beings who are constantly 'accomplishing meaning' (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Schegloff, 2006; Ten Have, 2002) through categorizations; categorizations which are based on normative assumptions about the topic at hand (Dooley, 2009).

This can be seen in the way in which 'membership' identities are constructed online. Significantly, the membership traits that are made relevant by the student-teachers in their online discourse are based on commonalities that they seem to attribute to the whole group, for instance, 'teacher-identity'. This 'shared' identity of 'teacher' in the virtual community allowed them to form a cohesion that was more important than other possible identities (for instance, exchange student, Korean, mother, wife, brother, etc.). This is clear in the way in which the majority of their online discourse aligns with 'teacher-talk': repertoire, jargon, topic-content, indexicality, etc.

*Extract 1: Imogene, cho73, and Ann@; online text chat transcript<sup>5</sup>*

**Imogene:** ok of all the documents, look at SRD II Part 1 and SRD II Part 2

**Ann@!:** ok Imy

**Imogene:** the others are just supporting materials, you can look at them if you want, but they're hard to edit

**cho73:** will you make a detailed lesson plan?

**Imogene:** yes, I'm far behind you guys in that, mainly because I don't know how to sequence these materials

**cho73:** do you also in charge of craft? if then you can connect craft and lesson material

**Ann@!:** but Imy, is your unit based on the grammar-based approach or the topic-based one? or maybe none of them...

**Imogene:** topic based: animals

This 'shared' teacher culture (similar jargon, topics, etc.) was far more relevant to the participants during synchronous interaction than other available identities which the participants could have deployed. There were few incidences in all of the transcripts where 'offline' identities were made relevant and these took place principally in the personal introductions (voicethreads) where some of the student-teachers mentioned their nationality and/or explained something about their countries of origin. Bearing in mind that the voicethreads constituted asynchronous interaction and that the student-teachers made them as personal introductions with a general



audience in mind, this deployment of ‘traditional’ cultural identities is contextually coherent.

Interestingly, however, these ‘identities’ were not picked up as part of the synchronous discourse between the participants as far as intrapersonal communication goes. In other words, there was little evidence of information-exchange dealing with these other possible identities; on the whole, if any ‘group’ identities were constructed they were ‘UAB’ group and ‘UIUC’ group (other group as activity partner). The ‘other’ identity could serve as a way of ‘opening up’ to their partners in the first encounter (as seen in Extract 2), but this was not the norm – in all of the other transcripts the participants limited themselves to ‘standard’ greetings (in English) and then moved immediately into the assigned activity. (The group in Extract 2, after beginning with a short ‘multilingual’ exchange, also went straight to the task.)

*Extract 2: Javi, Katherine, Lee; online text chat transcript*

**Javi:** Hi Lee!!!

**Katherine:** Lee ~are you in here?

**Lee:** This window?

**Katherine:** yes!

**Javi:** there you go

**Lee:** yea! Hola Javier!

**Javi:** Hi girl!!!!

**Lee:** ?Como te vas?

**Javi:** HAHAHAAAAA muy bien guapa!!!

**Lee:** Now I just need to learn Catalan!

**Javi:** hahaha, you should

**Katherine:** So how are you all doing with the project?

**Lee:** Not too bad, ya’ll?

**Javi:** well.. not too bad

**Katherine:** Yeah, I think I’m doing okay–but I have a lot more to work on

**Lee:** We’ll let’s talk about yours first, Katherine

Of course, it can be argued that the student-teachers were very task-focused and that the lack of sharing of interpersonal/intercultural information is due to the design and purpose of the exchange itself. However, by acknowledging that these pre-existing parameters are part of the contextual boundaries of the interaction, then the way in which the participants evoke (or not) cultural identity in these circumstances is of interest to the study. How they might react in other circumstances outside of the virtual community of practice (VCoP) would not be applicable to this context-related study.

Still, cultural identities did emerge in the transcripts. However, they were used in reference to their students – in other words, cultural identities were relevant for them (in identifying their students and parents) as part of their shared *teacher* identity.

*Extract 3: Imogene, cho73 and Ann@; online text chat transcript*

**Ann@!:** but be careful if they’re interested in some topics such as drugs, sex...cause parents may not like that...

**Imogene:** These are Korean students Anna, not Spaniards!

**Ann@!:** hahahah

**Imogene:** just kidding!

**cho73:** That's interesting point

**Imogene:** actually Americans would be worse! [...]

**Ann@!:** I only say parents from Barcelone are "beyond protective" [...]

**cho73:** Korean parents will not lose in terms of overprotective..

**Imogene:** this would be interesting to research

This does not mean that there were no misunderstandings or negative evaluations of the 'other' occurring between the student-teachers. However, the transcripts do not show misunderstandings based on *cultural* expectations so much as *personal* (or working group) expectations of the other, as is evident in Extract 4 and Figure 2. These data come from the final oral reflections in the last face-to-face tutorial and personal reflections in the student-teacher's final version of her ongoing wiki that mapped her progress.

*Extract 4: Final F2F tutorial; Caterina, Harold, Natalia, Teacher-Educator*

**CAT:** i liked doing the activity but then/ when the result was completely different so what i have planned that was like why did i do this\

**HAR:** yeah i think i had the same problem it wa:s\_ nice to work with them/ and it was kind of productive but the:n in the end when i asked for some changes they seemed like they didn't care anymore they just wanted to go for a holiday so\_ [yeah]

**NAT:** = yeah

**TE:** yeah the time was a bit off wasn't i:t

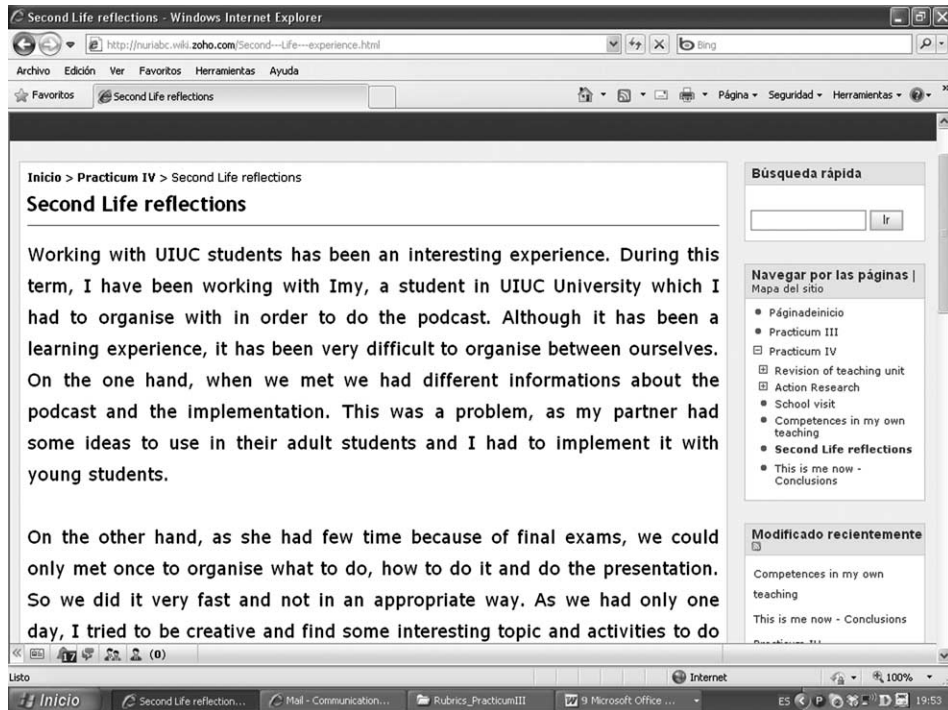


Figure 2. Screenshot of final wiki (UAB student).

### An intercultural 3rd space?

Hinnenkamp (1999) has argued that misunderstanding has become a principal working category for Intercultural Communication studies.

Generally speaking, [Misunderstandings] MUs have gained the role of a *raison-d'être* for studying ICC, in particular under the premise that the communication in question is between cultural others, thus transforming MU into intercultural MU. In other studies, conflicts, uncomfortable moments, and miscontextualization in terms of sociocultural knowledge become indicative for ICC. (Hinnenkamp, 1999: para. 1)

The author argues, however, that 'a communicative exchange is not intercultural by virtue of interactants being from different cultural backgrounds. Nor is it intercultural by virtue of a misunderstanding between interactants from different cultural backgrounds' (ibid.). Along these lines, Hinnenkamp calls for an interrogation of essentializing misunderstandings as intercultural without taking into consideration the interactional structure. The previous negative evaluations shown in Extract 4 and Figure 2 could be interpreted as a mismatch between different national, ethnic, cultural or linguistic backgrounds (e.g. 'we' Catalan/Spanish group versus 'they' American group); however, given the homogeneous backgrounds of both groups and the fact that national, ethnic or cultural traits were not made relevant previously, this does not seem an appropriate conclusion. Instead, it appears that there is a general disappointment in the online behaviour of some of the *members of the virtual community of teachers*. In other words, it appears that this cohesive identity (with all of them as members) was the most relevant one for them and the one that they oriented themselves to.

Does this mean that interactants in virtual communities constitute their intercultural encounters differently? As early as 1998, Poster asked:

Is virtual ethnicity an alternative to the binaries of particularism and universalism, parochialism, and cosmopolitanism, inserting itself between nations and communities, earthly ethnicities and races? (Poster, 1998, p. 186)

Much has been said about the potential of virtual communities and computer-mediated communication as a means of crossing boundaries and transcending 'real' world identities. At the same time, third space has been used to refer to a space between different cultures, where participants must negotiate cultural differences. Arguably, this space can promote intercultural learning by helping create awareness that one's own perspective on the world is not the only one. However, as Helm and Guth (2010) point out,

even though there has been much written on the new generation of students, (Prensky 2001, 2009; Oblinger and Oblinger 2005), the fact that students use these tools in their personal spheres does not automatically mean that they are capable of using them for effective learning in inter- and multicultural contexts. (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 100)

The unfamiliarity of some of the contexts in which students in the exchange were interacting did, at times, seem to make the students more aware of the different possible *channels* of communication. At times, they indicated a lack of familiarity or difficulties with some of the tools, thus they 'switched' to another channel, as in Figure 3. At the same time, when dealing with interaction that was



Figure 3. UAB student's TU and UIUC feedback on Zoho.

more familiar for them (e.g. information exchange through google.docs, text chats), the exchange closely follows a format that is easily transferable (and very similar) to an F2F situation, as in Extract 5.

*Extract 5: Nuria, Eunice; online text chat transcript*

**Nuria:** I am learning a lot reading your units in google.docs, the truth is that I didnt know about creative writing or critical reading, thanks! now I understand better with the 2nd draft. i also like they can choose what they want to write and they dont feel pressure or ashamed of being read aloud, because is anonymous

**eunice:** yea i think it'll help them be less biased

**Nuria:** however I think in your first lesson perhaps you wont be enough time to do what you planned

**eunice:** right. I think time is an issue.

**Nuria:** but i dont know your students, perhaps they can do it well

**eunice:** i'm thinking about stretching the unit to more days

Nonetheless, in distinctly 'new' and unfamiliar environments, such as Second Life, the students expressed fear, reluctance and, at times, even dislike towards the medium of communication (see Figure 4).

Dooly (2010b) proposes a pedagogical model for teaching ICC that combines features of Bourdieu's theory of individuals' socially-oriented social action and embodied dispositions, with Bennett's six stages of intercultural sensitivity and developmental procedures. If this model is used here as a tool for analysis of the

Speaking about the second life experience, I have to admit it has not been a nice experience. I found it unnecessary as it was easier to organise ourselves by messenger or skype than by second life. It is true that it is more personal but it is not worthy as is not a easy tool to deal with. Moreover, my computer was so old that I could not follow the rest of the people when we get together. It was a horrible experience for me. On the contrary, when we did the final party to say good bye was a nice experience as we could be all together exchanging experiences and dancing together.

Figure 4. Personal reflection in final wiki.

student-teachers' behaviour, it could be argued that the students in the exchange were in ethnorelative positions (e.g. adaptation stage) when dealing with channels of communication online that they were familiar with: they displayed 'behavioural code-shifting' and appeared 'comfortable with crossing points' (Dooly, 2010b, p. 63). However, when faced with unknown modes of communication they were ethnocentric: uncertain of their own agency and how to interact.

Significantly, their feelings towards the new technological tools were remarkably similar to the characteristics outlined by Matsumoto, Leroux, and Yoo (2005) when describing intercultural conflict and misunderstandings: negative emotions that 'are upsetting to our self concepts (...) Uncertainty contributes to this conflict. People may become impatient with or intolerant of the ambiguity, leading to anger, frustration, or resentment' (Matsumoto, Leroux, & Yoo, 2005, p. 16).

Does this imply that the students were involved in a new third space culture that at times made them feel angry, frustrated or resentful? If so, was their discomfort due to the context, the interaction or the interactants? Reasonably, when discussing Intercultural Communication and possible miscommunications, removing the interactants from the picture makes little sense – at least in the 'real' world. However, where does one draw the line about what constitutes a 'real' interactant in a 'virtual' world, when the interaction may take place between an avatar manipulated by a 'real' person and a 'bot' – which is computer-generated but still capable of interacting with the other avatars? Can one say that the student-teacher depicted in Figure 5 has 'integrate[d] fully in multiple environments and able to see [herself] as [a] co-constructor of culture' (Dooly, 2010b, p. 63) – features which Dooly has signalled as necessary for being interculturally competent – even if that only means that the teacher-student has adapted 'to society changes' and learnt to kitesurf in SL?

Furthermore, the data shows that the UAB and UIUC student-teachers achieved rich and meaningful exchanges and sharing of opinions and knowledge in some modes, but in other modes communication was more difficult or the participants felt that they were outside of their 'comfort zone'. Significantly, the same working groups, coming from different cultural backgrounds, at times co-constructed shared identity (e.g. teacher) and breakdowns in communication were minimal and in other moments, in more complex (third world?) environments, some misunderstandings occurred, as is evidenced in Figure 6.

Looking at the interaction from a 'performative' perspective (that takes into account both the context and the interactants) leads to the question: Was the student-teacher frustrated because of an intercultural misunderstanding with her online partner? Was the frustration due to technological issues only? Both participants were engaged in interaction in a 'foreign' culture (Second Life), but it is difficult to determine just how much influence their personal 'real' backgrounds may have had on their 'virtual' interaction. Are these misunderstandings related

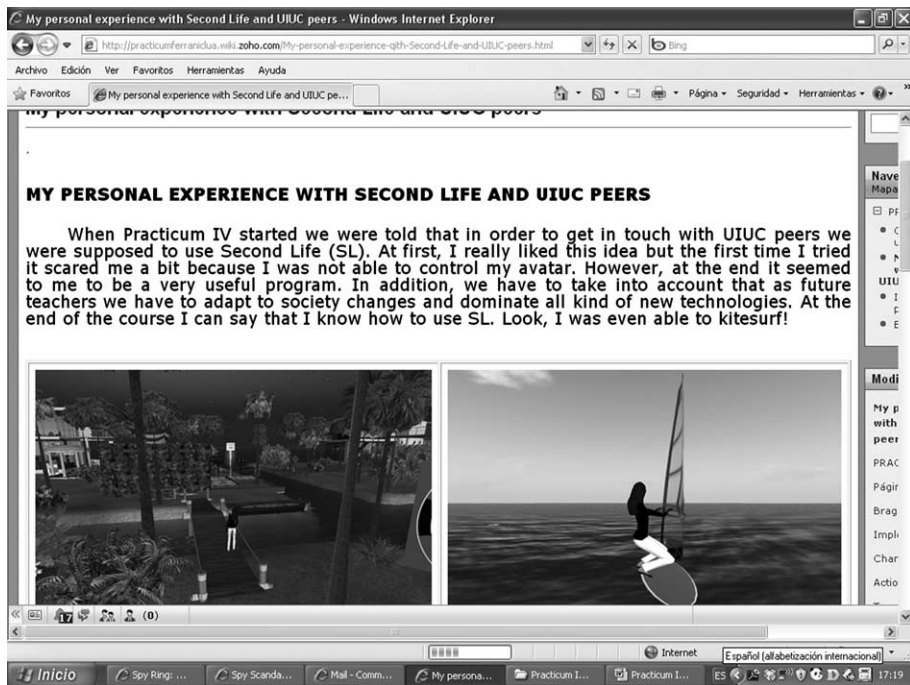


Figure 5. Another personal reflection in final wiki.

to a new SL culture? Holliday, Hyde, and Kullmann (2004) state that ‘any study of culture will inevitably be complex’ (p. 64), but what happens when these cultures are ‘mixed’ with a possible third 2.0 culture?

It seems that the fusing of *Inter*-cultural and *Inter*-net may require new parameters for defining and analysing ICC. Moreover, for teachers working with telecollaborative



Figure 6. Email to teacher.

language learning environments, they must be aware the students should be ‘nudged’ beyond their cultural comfort zones into cross-cultural encounters and experiences that promote intercultural literacy (Heyward, 2002), but at the same time ‘uncomfortable encounters alone are an insufficient condition for developing intercultural literacy, since they may stimulate learning about oneself and others or reinforce prejudice, nationalism and the like’ (Diehl & Prins, 2008, p. 106).

Defining ICC in a third space may seem to be a merely academic question, however, given the growing interest for telecollaboration in language learning the question takes on a more practical hue. The acceptance that ICC should be included in not only general education but language learning is well-documented (Alfred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003; Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Osler & Starkey, 2005; Trujillo Sáez, 2002), but the focus on ICC in 2.0 contexts is still a rather uncharted terrain. Are we talking about ‘new’ Intercultural Competences for language teachers or are they the same competences disguised in avatar clothing? Consider this short extract of a transcript for an SL interaction.

*Extract 6: Transcript from SL: Three female avatars in brainstorming session*

[...] the chapter is so short that I could literally type up the first five or six chapters and send them to her as an email\_she’s like a \_is our partner a her? A she?

As indicated by the extract, the gender of the avatar does not necessarily indicate the gender of the avatar owner in ‘real’ life. Research on language and gender underscore the socially-constructed aspects of gender (Cameron, 1990; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Norton & Toohey, 2004), suggesting that many male–female variations in use of language features are context-dependent. This implies a need for foreign language teachers’ awareness about socio-psychological factors, from a gender perspective, as part and parcel of learner diversity. Moreover, the understanding of the concept of identity has expanded from self to language – through social contexts – into ‘moment identification’ (Omoniyi, 2006) (although, admittedly, language is not the only means for constructing identity). Inevitably, then, the transgendered possibilities in SL interaction are relevant to teaching pedagogies as they move increasingly towards the integration of 2.0 tools. However, in these ‘third space’ domains of teaching, it is not only difficult to know discursive partners’ cultural identity or gender, they may not even appear as ‘human’ (see Figure 7).

This implies new communication semiotics – new uses of proxemic markers (e.g. emoticons, images, sounds and even touch are all part of a wide spectrum of communicative practices and competences in Web 2.0 communicative practices). In some cases, communicative practices may mirror ‘real life’.

SL Residents communicate through text, audio and ‘gestures’, which are scripts that allow users to communicate through body language using particular movements or sounds [...] proximity and placement of avatars and scripted gestures such as nodding ‘yes’ or ‘no’, shrugging, or smiling provide visual cues and shape interaction, all of which play a role in intercultural communication competence. (Molinsky et al., 2005; cited in Diehl & Prins, 2008, p. 104)

In other cases, the communicative practices pertain to the ‘Internet culture’ only. This can carry consequences for language teaching and learning in these new environments as teachers must deal with ‘new’ formulae for politeness (e.g. the many



Figure 7. Interaction with an 'alien' in SL.

disruptions and 'interruptions' that take place in synchronous text and audio chats and interaction in virtual worlds), new ways of discursively establishing topics (e.g. going 'straight to the point' in chats, emails and Instant Messaging) and a new sense of intimacy and sharing of details (e.g. the 'Facebook' culture), just to name a few areas. Kern (2010) argues that communicative competences must take into consideration the different modes by which meaning is mediated, which he has called critical semiotic awareness. Does language learning (and subsequently, language teacher education) also need to consider critical semiotic intercultural awareness? Guth and Helm (2010) propose a three-domain ICC model which considers the operational, cultural and critical dimensions of telecollaborative language learning.

Assuming that a 'third space', constituted through computer-mediated communication, can be exploited for educational purposes, activities can be designed that endeavour to get students (or, as in this case student-teachers) to participate in joint *de*-construction and *re*-construction of shared knowledge and understanding by all the participants, including assumed cultural roles and identities, especially in situations where everything is rendered unfamiliar. The online discursive practice of the student-teachers in this exchange indicates traits associated with an online 'operational attitude: willingness to explore, learn from, participate in, create, and collaborate and share in online communities' (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 74). Their cultural knowledge (in the sense of a telecollaborative ICC (Helm & Guth, 2010)) is indicative of knowledge of literacy practices applicable to the online contexts they were familiar with. However, the participants were critically aware of 'how and why new information and communication technologies are used' (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 74) and openly rebuffed suggestions by the teacher educators to use mediums that they felt were not 'useful for me or my future teacher' (UAB student).

Student-teachers also mentioned that they felt that eventually computer-mediated communication modes – especially Second Life – would provide them with possibilities to explore language and cultural learning with their own students, although most of them warned that this was 'far away in the future' (UAB student). Teacher education has a responsibility for orienting student-teachers towards this



'far away future'. Seeing the 'third space' as an opportunity for users to co-create a 'third' culture, through the combination of multiple cultures (including e-cultures), implies that the virtual communities can be where members build a sense of joint enterprise and identity around a specific area of knowledge and activity and share a repertoire of ideas, commitments, memories and ways of doing and approaching things. However, new critical semiotic awareness will be necessary because these 'ways of doing' may no longer be associated with the 'real' world.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has discussed some key issues concerning ICC that have emerged from a case study of an online telecollaborative teacher training programme. The diverse ways in which the student-teacher oriented their interaction with their distanced partners was influenced by their previous knowledge, acceptance, experience and willingness to adapt to the different available communication channels and modes – behaviours and perceptions that often seemed to mimic intercultural interactions in 'real' life. At the same time, the data showed that online interactions between the same group members (all from different cultural backgrounds) varied more according to the modes of communication used than the group member composition. Membership identities were constructed in the virtual interaction in similar ways to membership identities in the face-to-face interactions, especially when dealing with the related practices belonging to the community of teachers. These identities appeared to have more impact on the expectations concerning the behaviour of the 'other' than available social or cultural identities (e.g. information given to their partners in individually designed voicethread presentations).

The analysis of the different types of interaction – through different modes – demonstrates the need for interrogation of essentializing what 'intercultural' means within a space where new means of communication require skills and competences that are not necessarily linked to any specific culture. Following on Kern's (2010) argument that communicative competences must take into consideration the different modes by which meaning is mediated, it is proposed that analysis of such virtual interaction must move beyond ICC towards the notion of critical intercultural semiotic awareness.

Admittedly, the heading of this final section could be considered misleading. Just as the student-teachers in this article expressed, society is changing and there are many new and unknown factors. Given this panorama, it is difficult to draw conclusions. This is an incipient study into the kind of communication and cultures that may emerge through these new modes. It is perhaps too early to say whether these modes can rightfully be called 'third space' and if the interactants, upon entering an e-culture, are transcending and changing the cultural borders of the 'real' world. There needs to be more research into whether the forms of communication in this space do constitute different intercultural communicative competences and, if so, to provide descriptions of precisely what these are.

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## Notes

1. Skype is an audiophony programme that integrates text, voice, and video for communication through phones or the Internet. Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is an open-source e-learning software platform, or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Voicethread is an online platform that allows for collaborative, multimedia slide shows that can be accompanied by audio (other users can comment on the slides with text or voice). Second Life is a three-dimensional online platform where users interact through avatars.
2. This was an activity designed by the teacher trainers for the first meeting of both classes in SL. It was conceived as a means of helping the students learn to 'get around' as avatars on the three EduNation islands (teleporting each other, trying different modes of transport such as walking, riding, or flying), and, at the same time, they could get to know the different individuals through their avatars. Small groups were given assignments to 'find' previously hidden 'acorns' that held further instructions and questions to answer. The questions related to SL (in general), Edunation (geographic spots that they might find useful later on), and the group members (so that they could get to know each other). The information had to be 'delivered' to the teacher trainer avatars at the group's main SL 'hang-out' (where the hunt began).
3. Permission for reproducing participants' online materials was obtained from both study groups before beginning the exchange.
4. Vodcasts (video-on-demand casting) or podcasts are used to create digital content that can be uploaded to a website.
5. Data collected and transcribed by PhD candidate Victoria Antoniadou (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona).

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